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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a professional development process for principals centered on collaborative inquiry and reflection around case stories--written and oral descriptions of real-life leadership situations. In small, collegial groups, principals are invited to write, tell, and listen to each other's case stories about dilemmas in the workplace. In contrast to the case study, in which participants learn vicariously through other people's cases, the case-story model invites principals to learn by telling their own personal experiences as practitioners. The story form is a dominant sense-making tool, helping to bridge the gap between action and thought. The basic model requires at least 3 hours and involves 5 steps: (1) freewriting, a warmup exercise on writing about and discussing hot topics in small groups; (2) writing case stories; (3) telling, listening to, and discussing case stories; (4) reflecting as a small-group; and (5) reflecting as a whole-group. The process encourages introspection, fosters collaboration and collegiality, and facilitates group sense-making. Risks include writing difficulties for many, development of polished "war stories," and the danger of "group think." However, possibilities for "real talk" can potentially support underlying and deeper unity among people. (Contains 11 references.) (MLH)

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Session Title: Perspectives on the Professional Development of Principals

Case Stories of Principal Practice: A Collaborative Inquiry Approach to Professional Development

By Patricia Maslin-Ostrowski, Florida Atlantic University

I had just come back from my rounds in the cafeteria and was feeling like things were going pretty well. As I entered my office, I knew my momentary peace would be short-lived as Mrs. Dragon, the music teacher, headed toward me, full steam ahead. She was furious and began arguing loudly. Because of the space and technology simulation, she had not been able to meet with the 7th grade teams for a week. She said that for various reasons, the kids had missed too much music this year. I tried to calm her down and explain how the interdisciplinary curriculum sometimes requires schedule changes to accommodate special activities. But, she was not at all interested. She finally left my office in a huff, demanding, "Who has the rights to these kids, anyway?"

Principals across the country, just like the writer of this case story, have stories to tell about their experiences as school leaders. Writing and telling case stories is a powerful way for educators to understand how their world works. How story fits in the professional development of school administrators will be the focus of this paper.

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The important job of principal is demanding, complicated, multidimensional and the work is never finished. Professional development can be helpful to principals in finding ways to be more effective leaders and can even enhance personal growth. Alternatively, it can simply be a waste of time, and time is a commodity in short supply for today's school administrators. As we know from practice and from extensive research with teachers, sporadic, one-shot training programs are ineffective. Learning will not likely be transferred to schools unless the learning is ongoing. Commonsense and research also tell us that the give and take of collaborative inquiry, for example principals meeting in small groups to share case stories, is essential for professional growth and for transforming theory into school practice. Unfortunately, there usually is little opportunity and meager support for such professional development in the life of a principal. My own research, together with my colleague Richard Ackerman, has looked at the use of case story as a collaborative inquiry approach to the professional development of educational leaders. Specifically, we have focused on case story as a reflective and collective learning process.

Our work, then, has centered on how principals engage in collaborative inquiry and reflection around case stories, that is both written and oral descriptions of real life "close-to-the-bone" leadership situations. In small collegial groups principals are invited to write, tell and listen to each other's case stories about dilemmas in the workplace, such as the story that opened this paper.

In an early study we examined and compared traditional case study methods and storytelling methods when used as companion teaching tools (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 1995). When reconciling case method and case story as they applied to the experiences of graduate students of educational leadership, we concluded that both methods can provide

complementary but distinctive perspectives on fundamental processes of learning and growth.

Thus in contrast to case study where participants learn vicariously through other peoples' cases, the case story model invites principals to learn by writing and telling their own personal experiences as practitioners. It is an approach that blends aspects of the tradition, artistry and imagination of storytelling.

As we have continued to work with and study groups using case story we have found that rather than providing ready-made solutions, case story offers a unique way for people to learn from their own work experience and to build on the experience of others. It also encourages practitioners to assume responsibility for their own professional development, as well as that of their colleagues.

Underlying our work is the premise that the story form is a dominant sense-making tool for school administrators. We share Howard Gardner's (1995) view that "the story is a basic human cognitive form; the artful creation and articulation of stories constitutes a fundamental part of the leader's vocation" (p.43). The case story is presented as a construct with three important characteristics. It is highly personal, it has a communal aspect and it is embedded in ecological systems of thought (Bohm, 1994) and the social order of activity. When principal learners (Barth, 1996) are urged to write their own case stories and tell them to each other in small groups they are implicitly encouraged to think about and better understand their own theories of practice and how they handle critical incidents in the workplace. They may gain insights into their attitudes and values. Case story, we have found, helps to bridge the gap between action and thought. As participants engage in a reflective and collective learning process around stories, they are challenged to consider different perspectives and to examine alternative possibilities. Moreover,

beyond analyzing a particular problem, some groups are able to enter into a kind of critical conversation (Brookfield, 1995) or real talk (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 1997) where they learn to think together, less self-centeredly, and develop a deeper understanding of each other's practice.

The case story model challenges principals to view their own experiences as stories waiting to be told (Witherell & Noddings, 1991). Any practitioner willing to subject his or her work experiences to systematic self-scrutiny and the analysis of others is a candidate for this form of professional development.

The Case Story Approach: Developing Case Stories In Educational Leadership

Case story has been used in a number of different settings, such as professional development programs, workshops, leadership institutes and graduate school classrooms. The basic model requires a minimum of three hours and involves five steps which are succinctly described below (See Maslin-Ostrowski & Ackerman, 1998, for more details.).

Step 1: The Freewrite

Once a level of trust has been established and the group is ready, they are introduced to the freewrite activity (Elbow, 1986). This is designed to warm participants to writing about issues of practice and leadership. Everyone is asked to write for seven minutes using a stem such as "The obstacle to leadership for me is..." They are advised not to worry about form, but to let their ideas flow. After writing, participants are divided into groups of three where each member has five minutes to read his or her story aloud, highlighting portions of the narrative that are especially meaningful, while the others listen without interrupting. When the storyteller is finished talking, the other two can begin to have a dialogue about the story.

Step 2: Writing Case Stories

Before writing, the group is shown an example of a case story, such as the one below:

A Case of Equal Access But What's Right?

Monday morning I find Maria's parents and an interpreter waiting outside my office. I'm told Maria refuses to come to school because she is "bored to death." Maria, who speaks very little English, was placed in a basic math class when she arrived here six weeks ago. Her parents say, "In Caracas she was doing Algebra and here she sits at her desk, day after day, practicing basic computation and times tables." I assured the parents I would check into the situation. It turns out Maria is capable in math. "No wonder she's frustrated," I thought, so I made arrangements to move her to a higher level math class. A week later, however, Maria's new teacher storms into my office complaining that she can't communicate with this student. In a loud voice she asserted, "She may know math, but she can't speak English. I have 35 other students in my class, and I don't have time to spend with this child. She needs to learn English first. You have to find another placement for her." I thought to myself, "What is the right thing to do? And what is realistic?"

After commenting on the power and potential of story, along with outlining the key elements of a story, the principals are persuaded to write a one-page narrative about a real-life leadership experience — a critical event or incident that presented them with a genuine dilemma or crucial decision, and that matters to them. Once all instructions are given and questions answered, everyone, including the facilitator, should be sitting quietly writing. For us, it has been a galvanizing experience to spend 30-45 minutes in a room writing with other educators.

Step 3: Telling, Listening & Discussing Case Stories

Again, the entire group is divided into triads for a 45 minute session of telling, listening to and discussing case stories. In these small groups, members will take turns playing each of three roles: storyteller, facilitator of the process, and timekeeper. Roles are rotated every fifteen minutes. The process begins with participants reading their own case story aloud while the others listen carefully without interrupting. The writer then "tells" the story in his or her own words by elaborating on the text and identifying its essence — what he or she believes to be the heart of the case story. When finished telling, the participants may ask *only* clarifying questions in order to understand fully the dilemma. When the clarifying questions are exhausted they can begin to frame the problem and interpret the case story. We ask that the storytellers *not* participate in this initial discussion, but watch and listen as the others discuss their case story. The small group may identify the central issue, explore alternatives and consider the consequences. The goal, however, is not to find a single solution, but rather to collectively examine alternatives and find meaning in the stories.

Step 4: Small Group Reflection

Next, each triad is asked to pair up with another group. They are encouraged to consider three questions:

a) What was it like listening to and discussing your colleagues's case stories?

b) What was it like writing, telling and hearing discussions of your own case story?

c) Do you have any observations and reactions to the work that you just completed?

Step 5: Whole Group Reflection

Finally, groups are asked to report any important findings that they discussed. During this

time everyone should have a chance to comment on and react to the experience, building on the ideas of each other.

The time together might be concluded by talking about the importance of improving professional practice and how it is essential to first understand practice in order to strengthen it. Facilitators may also want to discuss how difficult it is to understand practice while immersed in it. Lastly, facilitators might emphasize that by allowing time and distance to reflect on practice school leaders will be better able to make sense of it.

Benefits & Risks of Case Story

We have found that this approach assists principals to tap into and better comprehend their own stories of practice. Selecting what to write requires authors to look inward and start an introspective process. By translating their experience into story form, they are already beginning to make sense of it. With the benefit of time and distance, writers are able to revisit and relive the experience. They may reconstruct their stories as new meanings emerge. Basically, writing case stories can help individuals access and reflect on their personal stories of the workplace, which may lead to greater wisdom.

A second benefit is that the storytelling and listening experience fosters collaboration and collegiality. By inviting principals to tell their stories aloud and to discuss them with others, the story moves from a private to public realm. Once a case story is told, a small group of colleagues focuses on each story, trying to make sense of it. The group's mission is to work together to figure out what is going on in the case story. This process helps to break down the isolation some principals encounter in schools and build a more collegial environment. And the process promotes an atmosphere of trust and a sense of participation and well-being.

A third benefit is that the communal and collaborative nature of storytelling and listening can lead to group meaning-making. The structure of the group experience prompts principals to look at and examine their practice in fresh ways. It also encourages them to think about how they talk to each other and may tempt them to break what for many is a fragmented, habitual mode of conversation. Some groups are able to imagine experiences anew and collectively create ideas and possibilities for understanding practice. As a group struggles to make collective sense of a story, they may eventually grasp more deeply each other's experience.

While there are advantages to groups of principals using story to try to make sense of their practice and find meaning, there are also limitations. One risk of cases stories that we have found is that writing does not come easily to many people which means reluctant writers may require special assistance if they are to become engaged. It is also essential that a safe learning environment be created, one that encourages people to take chances and discuss matters from the workplace without worrying about exposure. Given that such conditions cannot be met for everyone, some participants will restrict what they write and say.

A second risk is that some participants may develop "war stories" rather than case stories. The problem with "war stories" is that individuals typically have told the story over and over again, so that they present the story in a way that declares it is finished, not open to alternative perspectives. This kind of story shuts down the points of view that may be raised by other group members. Stories like this diminish opportunities for learning.

Yet a third risk along these lines is a danger of "group think," whereby participants suppress ideas that contradict majority thinking. This would be contrary to the purpose of group reflection which is to consider multiple points of view and ideas, not consensus. As seasoned

school leaders realize, congeniality does not guarantee a productive group. "Group think" may also occur when a group rushes to solve a problem or when a dominant individual is able to exert too much influence on how others think.

Conclusion

> *Narrative involves the gathering together of events into a plot which signification is given to the events as they relate to the theme of the story. The plot configures the events into a whole and the events are transformed from merely serial, independent happenings into meaningful happenings that contribute to the whole theme. As the meaning and function of an individual word becomes clear when the sentence of which it is a part is understood, so the significance of an individual event becomes apparent when one knows the plot of which it is apart.*
>
> Donald Polkinghorne, p. 143, 1988

Our work affirms that stories are a fundamental vehicle to communicate meaning. In the case story groups that we have studied, we have found that stories help practitioners understand what happens to them. The stories they tell are intertwined with personal history and work contexts, and suggest that administrative knowledge and practice must be studied in the rich context of school leaders' lives (Maslin-Ostrowski & Ackerman, 1997).

We have also found that a feature of case story is it moves people from an individual, private act of story construction to the communal activity of story telling and listening. For many participants the power of sharing stories lies not only in the evolution of the stories themselves, but in the communal nature of sharing the stories. Meaning, then, is found not just in the actual stories told, but in the collective, reflective grasping of experiences.

Through this group meaning-making process, some groups have been helped to arrive at a kind of "real talk" that deepens their understandings of each other's experiences. The narrative structure imposed on a group's conversation about principal practice may help to break what for many is fragmented "knee jerk" talk and can lead to better habits of discourse.

The story, the telling and the real talk that may follow has the potential to support an underlying and deeper unity among people. A remarkable finding is that the groups are able to accomplish this in a short period of time. We believe that for most groups, their paths to understanding and meaning occur through confronting and learning to cope with the micro-complexity of their own experiences told through stories, a complexity that is not often available in the workplace, professional development programs or traditional classrooms.

If, however, the case story approach is used as a discrete activity at a mandated workshop for principals without any opportunity and expectation for continuous conversations, it will be of marginal value to participants. On the other hand, if districts believe that principals will learn and grow from sharing and reflecting on stories of practice with other principals, and that this learning will be transferred to schools, then time must be built into the work schedule for this to happen. Too often principals come together to consider someone else's agenda, typically about managerial matters previously discussed. A better alternative would be to hold regular monthly meetings where principals focus on real-life leadership dilemmas that are significant to them. As professional developers and practitioners consider this model, it would be helpful to keep in mind that it is a process that can be learned and adapted for each unique group of principals.

The literature on narrative as a means of understanding learning continues to burgeon at a stunning pace. Our own explorations of case story as an approach to professional development

and teaching leadership confirms for us that stories are something that people naturally do at a primary level of meaning-making. We have found that stories of practice are not only waiting to be told, they are significantly formed in their telling, and as such, subject to influence and mediation by others. Therefore, we believe that principals may be helped to tell their stories with better and more meaningful results.

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